



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time | Year C



1886-1894 *The Return of The Prodigal Son*, James Tissot



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Prayer for Generosity

St. Ignatius of Loyola

Eternal Word,

only begotten Son of God,

Teach me true generosity.

Teach me to serve you as you deserve.

To give without counting the cost,

To fight heedless of wounds,

To labor without seeking rest,

To sacrifice myself without thought of any reward

Save the knowledge that I have done your will.

Amen.

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**

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Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Gospels of these weeks are from the section of Luke's Gospel that takes place "on the way to Jerusalem." It is a journey every Christian must take.
- ▶ All three readings today are a call to repentance and conversion.
- ▶ The three parables today are told with Jesus' intended audience in mind--scribes and Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees believe they alone are the arbiters of what is righteous and lawful. They accused Jesus of eating with sinners. Jesus uses these stories to vindicate himself and challenge their self-righteousness.
- ▶ Jesus insisted that God welcomes saint and sinner alike.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First Reading: Exodus 32, 7-11. 13-14

- ▶ Moses has been at the summit of Mount Sinai (also referred to as Horeb) for forty days. The people anxiously await his descent. They become increasingly impatient as a result of his delayed return.
- ▶ They ask Aaron to fashion a molten calf (a token to a fertility god). As far as God is concerned this is an act of rebellion. The people outright reject the covenant just forged with Moses on Mount Sinai. God is furious but he does not destroy them. Moses intervenes on their behalf when he argues that God already brought them this far, if he were to destroy them now it would get in the way of his divine plan. Egypt could assert that God brought them to the desert simply to kill them. If God leveled the ultimate punishment of death the promises made to the patriarchs would be null and void.
- ▶ Even though Moses spoke for the people and in essence kept God from killing the lot of them, Moses' own fury could not be contained and he unleashed it upon the people.
- ▶ Many scholars believe the golden calf event was a later event that was inserted into the story of the Israelites' wandering in the desert. Such an insertion is called an anachronism. It is assumed that the event is an allusion to the two calves that were installed and similarly honored at the Shrine of Dan and Bethel by the Jewish king Jereboam.
- ▶ The king used the same words that were used in the golden calf event that were used when he led the northern kingdom of Israel into apostasy against the Lord.
- ▶ This entire event gives the reader a front row seat at the most incredulous and arrogant ingratitude ever witnessed. The Israelites, who had just been delivered out of four hundred years of bondage in Egypt, rejected the very God who saved them.

- ▶ Moses receives the Law of the Covenant on the summit of Mount Sinai at the same time the people defy the God who saved them at the foot of that same mountain.
- ▶ What could have been a defining moment for Israel became a sign of her sin and rebellion.
- ▶ Israel understood its own sin and rebellion to be the result of its own intrinsic character. The entire history of Israel is a story of sin and redemption. The people sinned and God always forgave them.
- ▶ Israel's intrinsic nature was one of unfaithfulness. God's response was always unconditional mercy and forgiveness.
- ▶ Scholars tell us that the calf was not created to represent a false god but as a reminder of the God of Israel.
- ▶ Even though their intention was not to worship a false god but to have a representation of the God they did worship, their sin was a sin against the prohibition against the making and use of icons.
- ▶ This is a reminder to us today that we can be as vulnerable to the "crowd mentality" as the ancient Israelites. People can get caught up in what they think is the voice of God, when in fact it is the voice of human beings that are listening to their own arrogant voice rather than the voice and will of God.
- ▶ Aaron thought he was placating the people and saving their faith when in fact he was threatening it even further.
- ▶ Moses' advocacy functioned as a renewal of the covenant God made with Abraham that Abraham's descendants would be heir to the Promised Land and their descendants would be abundant.
- ▶ Moses is the star of this sequence. He mediates the promises made to Israel's ancestors, and he looks forward to the redemptive work of Christ.
- ▶ This pericope reminds us that God always saves in spite of human arrogance, sin and rebellion.
- ▶ Jesus would be the incarnation of that forgiving grace for all of salvation



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about God's relationship with sinful human beings?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about the moral life and/or making correct moral choices?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about the "crowd mentality"?

- ▶ How might we discern the voice of God over the voice of human beings disguised as God?
- ▶ Put yourself in the place of the Israelites. All they had known is four hundred years of horrific bondage. God delivered them from that bondage. The journey out of bondage was not an easy one. They expected God to do everything for them. We have not experienced bondage in Egypt. How then, could this be a relevant word for us today? How are we in bondage? How have we been delivered? How have we been ungrateful for God's action in our lives?
- ▶ In what way do we placate like Aaron did when it comes to our relationship with God today?
- ▶ What character of sin resides within you that is in need of God's deliverance?

Second Reading: 1 Timothy 1, 12-17

- ▶ 1 Timothy is referred to as a pastoral letter.
- ▶ The pastoral letters were written to form and strengthen the Christian community after the death of Paul.
- ▶ The pastoral letters echo the voice of Paul who admonishes, strengthens and instructs the community to live the Gospel and to endure, persist and be refined and strengthened through the mystery of suffering.
- ▶ Paul's concern was the building of church/community. He was not concerned with the way in which that community was formed—only that it was formed and that it thrived.
- ▶ Paul did not establish any particular leadership style. He utilized various models such as bishops and elders. The author of the letters was more concerned about simply creating and forming churches and whatever was required to further that goal.
- ▶ The author's ultimate concern was faith-filled, righteous living.
- ▶ The letters sought to establish authority by claiming Paul as the author of the letters and by insisting that they *must* follow the will of God. The strong exhortation was authority enough.
- ▶ Paul was a sinner and was made righteous through faith in Christ. He is the example for those who seek to live the moral life. Believers are to look to Paul the sinner who was transformed by the power of grace.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ In what way, if any, is this letter a relevant letter today?
- ▶ Paul's Gospel was simple. He taught that we must be faithful to God and live the moral life. Living the moral life means that one must follow the Ten Commandments of the Lord and the Beatitudes of Jesus. It is our response to the love God has shown for us. List the Ten Commandments and explain what each one is asking of us. Choose one of the commandment with which you most struggle and share how it impacts your life and what you can do to grow in that commandment.

Gospel: Luke 15, 1-32

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ We must remember the intended audience when we interpret the three parables in today's Gospel--tax collectors, sinners, scribes and Pharisees.
- ▶ The problem Pharisees had with Jesus was his attitude and posture toward sinners. Jesus welcomed sinners and offered forgiveness to them without demanding that they adhere to the proscriptions set forth in the law for making amends and restitution. The Pharisees were incredulous that Jesus would offer sinners admission into the kingdom without making the requisite demands of atonement and obedience to the law.
- ▶ The Pharisees understood Jesus' offer of forgiveness an assumption on his part that he knew the mind and heart of God—blasphemous as far as they were concerned! The principle characters in each parable were hardly worthy of the forgiveness Jesus was extending.
- ▶ They considered Jesus' propositions to be absurd. No one would ever leave ninety-nine sheep to fend for themselves and go after one lone stray. No one would expend such time and energy to hunt for a lost coin when he or she still had nine others. And as for the return of the disgraced son—he was not worthy of the humiliation and disgrace his father endured when there was a faithful son still at home. Who is this Jesus? More importantly, who does he think he is?
- ▶ **Lost sheep.** Jesus asks the Pharisees to imagine themselves as the shepherd in the parable. This would have immediately raised an eyebrow and the ire of the Pharisees in attendance. “Who? Me? You want me to imagine myself as one among a breed of dishonest, thieving scoundrels?” Even though Scriptures often allude to the shepherd metaphor as a reference for God, shepherds of Jesus' day were hardly considered God-like. How dare Jesus invite the righteous Pharisees to remotely put themselves in the shepherd's shoes—even if only in their

imagination! The parable stands as an indictment and a challenge to religious leaders to reach out and find the one lost sheep and invite them back into the fold they left. Jesus created angst in these parables. He turned their world upside down.

- ▶ ***Woman and the lost coin.*** What would Jesus' listeners have heard in this story? Yes, the obvious theme is that God goes to great lengths to search for the lost. Contemporary listeners would understand this parable far differently than a first century listener. The woman was not poor—she had in her possession a third of her overall month's salary already in her possession. The average peasant of that day would consider that amount an extravagance. This is not about the contrast between rich and poor. It is simply an illustration that whether male or female both characters demonstrate the way in which God acts in the lives of human beings. He seeks out the lost.
- ▶ The woman goes to great lengths in her house to find the coin. The point of the parable that would have been most upsetting to the listeners is that God was portrayed as a woman. Then and today that would have raised more than one eyebrow. It would have been (and perhaps still is) as shocking as asking the religious leaders to imagine themselves as low life shepherds.
- ▶ It was far easier then and perhaps now to imagine God as a loving father than it was and it is to imagine God as a lowly woman in search of a coin. What an amazing, expansive, inclusive God we have! The message is the same—we are all to be as diligent as seeking out the lost as the woman who lost the coin and the shepherd who left the ninety-nine to find the one. We are to bring them home—back into the fold from which they left.
- ▶ ***Prodigal Son.*** The prodigal son demands immediate distribution of his inheritance—a serious affront to his father. He was saying to the father that he in effect wished him dead. The prodigal son is completely lost.
- ▶ The older son had the responsibility of reconciling the younger son to the father. He failed to do so, thus alerting the listener that there is a problem with the older son as well. He does not ever have to reconcile with his brother AND he benefits from the younger son receiving his inheritance—a win/win situation for the older son.
- ▶ Listeners marvel at the father's inconceivable patience and love.
- ▶ In order for the son's request to be legally binding, the father had to act as though the idea were his own.
- ▶ The parable continues and the prodigal son squanders his inheritance among the Gentiles.
- ▶ There is now an offense to the community since his association with Gentiles and pigs (an extreme offense) rendered him unclean and a threat to the ritual purity of the community.
- ▶ He decides to repent and go home. One might seriously question the sincerity of his repentance, however.
- ▶ The son sets his plan in motion. He had a moral responsibility to his father. The community would never allow him to return without making amends to his father. What if all the sons acted similarly?

- ▶ The recalcitrant son rehearsed his speech. "Employ me as a hired hand." There was no conversion implied in his offer to be a hired hand. Hired servants received a wage, and lived away from the estate. Hired hands were independent contractors and socially an equal with brother and father. The son was not looking for reconciliation; he was looking to save face. He could repay his debt, and still live away from home. Reconciliation was on his terms. He will save himself. He did not need anyone's saving grace.
- ▶ Landowners lived in village, not on an isolated estate. The prodigal son not only insulted his father, but he sinned against the community in three ways. 1. He insulted his father, 2. He sold the land and lost it 3. He squandered it on Gentiles.
- ▶ The father knew his son would one-day return so he prepared for his homecoming. The father understood all too well that the community would not accept him. He had to prepare the way. The father initiated reconciliation with the community. He devised a strategy.
- ▶ The father ran to meet his errant son—a humiliating action that no self-respecting elder would ever do. His action would draw attention, thereby drawing a crowd. Reconciliation would be public. The people would be privy to the father's amazing demonstration of humiliating love.
- ▶ The son is caught so off guard that when he sees his father run to him and offer him the robe and ring (indications of his status as true heir and son) he was speechless. His pre-rehearsed speech fell by the way side. **Herein is the moment of conversion**—the Father's unconditional, humiliating love.
- ▶ The father kisses him as a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness (healing touch). The son's pre-rehearsed speech falls by the wayside and he melts in utter conversion at so great an extension of unexpected love and mercy.
- ▶ The father reconciles him to the community with a banquet (images of reconciling power of Eucharist). A fatted calf meant the entire village was invited. The conferral of the robe demonstrated that the son is not only reconciled and forgiven but he is restored to former status. The ring was a symbol of restored trust. The shoes were a sign of a freed person, not a servant.
- ▶ The son accepted his father's mercy and forgiveness. He accepted the grace his father offered him. He returned not as a slave, but as son.
- ▶ The older son (representative of Israel—the scribes and Pharisees) should have been a good host. Instead he humiliated his father in front of the village. The older son publicly breaks with the father. Again the older son's response would have caught the attention of the guests—they would have expected him to receive a thorough thrashing from the father.
- ▶ The father, however, extends the same humiliating love to his older son—he offers him the same reconciliation.
- ▶ The older son rejects the father and considers himself no more than a hired hand. The older son was estranged and rebellious in his heart while he was in his father's house.
- ▶ The community understood the older son's sin to be worse than the younger son. He was resentful. He was not honest. He lived in his father's house not as son but as hired hand. He too wanted his father dead—he too benefited from the

younger son's request.

- ▶ The older son did not repent.
- ▶ God not only welcomes and loves sinners but he seeks after them with a humiliating kind of love, an unfathomable love. The Pharisees were invited to see themselves in the person of the older son. The parable ends with invitation to repent.
- ▶ This is known as a "How Much More" parable: "If this is how much this father loved his sons, how much more will your heavenly father love and show mercy and forgiveness to you".
- ▶ Without the Father's humiliating display of love, the younger son might never have grasped the level of the father's love. The self-effacing, out pouring of a humiliating love for his sons has echoes in the future cross of Christ.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ In what way is this a relevant word for us today?
- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ Imagine leaving ninety-nine sheep and searching after the one lost sheep? What does this parable tell us about the ninety-nine? What does it tell us about the one? What does it tell us about the shepherd? What does it tell us about God's relationship with us?
- ▶ Can you imagine a time in your life in which God did or would have done the same for you?
- ▶ How difficult or easy is it for you to imagine the woman as an image of God? What does this parable teach us about God? Why is this good news?
- ▶ Have you ever been loved as the sons are loved in this gospel?
- ▶ The younger son was not converted until he experienced the amazing love of his father who, according to the cultural norms of his day, completely humiliated himself by running to his son to offer him unconditional forgiveness. Do you truly believe that Christ extends that same forgiveness to you? If so, how is your life different as a result?
- ▶ Have you ever tried to extend a humiliating, self-emptying love to someone else? What did you learn from the experience? What does your experience teach you about God and the implications of this Gospel?
- ▶ With whom do you most relate---the younger son, the older son, or the father?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this Gospel? In what way does it invite you to grow in faith and to be a better disciple?

- ▶ In what way is this Gospel a foreshadowing of the Eucharist? What are the implications of the banquet the Father provided for the community?
- ▶ In what way is this Gospel a foreshadowing of the humiliation of the Cross? What is the invitation for disciples?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97

APPENDIX

#1. We have not known four hundred years of bondage in Egypt. But we do know slavery. We know slavery to our addictions. Just when God strengthens me to overcome my addictions, I think I can manage them all on my own and I quickly find that I am powerless without God's help. I become ungrateful to God for the help and strength he has given in the past, I fail to seek it in the present and I lack the trust to believe he will give it again in the future. It is the human condition. The people of Israel needed a golden image of God to remind them of God's action in their lives—they were living it in real time, yet they needed a fake reminder. So often I/we look for God in the brazen images I/we create to remind us of God's sovereignty and I/we fail to see the God who is participating and active in our lives all the time, every day.

#2. The commandment which I most with is the ninth commandment—I don't have to worry about coveting my neighbor's spouse—that is not an issue for me—but coveting my neighbor's goods is another matter. I can easily become dissatisfied with my own circumstances and desire what others have—that could be an easier life, more wealth, the health of my family—whatever it is—it is easy for me to get caught up in desiring what others have—what I sometimes erroneously think they have. The implication of Paul's letter to Timothy is to participate in the life of Christ going on within me. When that is my focus I need not worry about the ninth Commandment; I am at peace and happy with what I have and with whatever life brings.

#3. I am not aware of anyone humiliating himself or herself in the act of loving me unconditionally (except Christ), but I am the recipient of unconditional love in my life. I know that my family who has stood by me through all the difficult times in my life treasures me. I have friends who love me and are there for me no matter what. I am blessed.

I do have just a partial glimpse of how the father in this story must have felt in the face of a child's total rejection. In the days before my son was diagnosed with a tragic mental illness in his late teens, he was behaving badly. Some well-meaning friends counseled us to put him out of the house. After a great deal of prayer we made the decision to stay the course and be there for him no matter what. It was embarrassing. I was a person with a public ministry in a very small town. Everyone knew everyone else's business. The correctness of our decision would soon become apparent to us.

We later learned that when the disease came crashing down upon him and he wandered aimlessly across the country, it was the memory of how we stood by him during that earlier time that compelled him to keep in touch with his family. I consider the decision we made to be a contributing factor in saving his life. We were his lifeline. He recognized that we were the ones who loved him no matter what.

The parable of the prodigal son is indeed a “how much more” parable. If we loved our son the way we were compelled to love him during that very difficult time, how much

more, then, does God love us when we sin, when we reject our inheritance, when we get caught up in feelings of entitlement (such as the older son). God is there to run after us and die on a cross to get our attention about the level of his love for us. God will go to any lengths to save us, to heal us and to reconcile us. There is no greater love.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Morality
Moral Decision Making
Sacrament of Reconciliation
Church and Ecclesiology

Sin and Grace
Symbol of Bread and Wine
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

MORALITY

Today's liturgy is a call to live the moral life. Moses was on top of Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments as the people chose to rebel against God. God's faithful people are called to live the moral life. The first reading is an example of what happens when people do not listen to God and the moral imperatives of his will for our lives. When we do not trust God we are not living moral lives. The focus of our extended session today will be MORALITY.

MORAL DECISION MAKING

Today's first reading is a call to live the moral life. The Moses story is a reminder of the implications of choosing to disobey God and to be unfaithful to his covenant. In order to remain faithful to the covenant God forged with Moses and later the ultimate covenant Christ inaugurated we must learn how to make correct and right moral choices. Thus the focus of today's extended doctrinal session will be MORAL DECISION MAKING.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

The sacrament of reconciliation extends God's mercy and the reconciling presence of Christ to us sinners. Today's liturgy reminds us that the Father will go to any lengths to save the sinner. We need go no farther than the sacrament of reconciliation. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION.

SIN AND GRACE

Today's liturgy is a reminder that we are sinners, that we are called to make moral choices, that we sometimes fail and that God always invites us to repent. God's unconditional forgiveness is always available to those who seek it. Today's liturgy is an invitation to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about grace and sin.

CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY

Paul's letter is concerned with the formation of church communities. He does not set forth a rigid set of rules and regulations, but invites each community to use whatever leadership model best suits their needs. In giving such instructions he begins to establish a doctrine of church and of ecclesiology. Thus it is most fitting that today our extended doctrinal session will focus on CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY.

SYMBOL OF BREAD AND WINE

Jesus alludes to the Eucharist when he calls for a banquet that would feed the entire community. It was a sign of reconciliation. The Eucharist is a reconciling sacrament. Thus it would be an appropriate time to reflect on the Eucharist and the SYMBOL OF BREAD AND WINE.

EUCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.